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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1314
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4850
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8402
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5964
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1680
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1809
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000518

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#) [EAID](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC CHANGE THROUGH CYCLONE
NARGIS RELIEF

REF: A. RANGOON 477 B. RANGOON 454 C. RANGOON 338

Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Except for a few isolated cases highlighted by the Burmese exile press, private relief efforts in the Delta are proceeding unhindered by the GOB, including those undertaken by pro-democracy groups. These efforts are widespread and crucial to covering gaps in the government's inept response to Cyclone Nargis. By necessity, a variety of private organizations are now playing an important role in recovery efforts. As a result, relationships between villagers and local authorities are changing and villagers are taking actions to ensure aid is distributed transparently and evenly. The continuing international relief and recovery effort, conducted properly, has the potential to move Burma towards democratic change by instilling participatory decision making and notions of accountability at a grass-roots level. The regime has opened opportunities to the international community to work with Burmese civil society to an unprecedented degree. Only by choosing to participate in this effort will we be able to shape it and influence its outcome. End summary.

High-Profile Arrests

¶2. (C) Although exile media has highlighted the arrest of comedian/activist Zarganar (Ref B), who was working with other artists and political activists to deliver relief in the Delta, the majority of private relief efforts continue unhindered. The few arrests we have learned about appear due to the arrestees' public criticism of the regime's efforts, rather than designated to stop private efforts. Pro-democracy activists tell us Zarganar was likely arrested because he gave a series of high-profile interviews to international media criticizing the regime and its inept response to Cyclone Nargis, not for solely delivering relief.

¶3. (C) Another arrest given attention in the exile press was that of political activist and businessman, Aung Kyaw San. Aung Kyaw San was arrested with several other volunteers when he returned from burying deceased cyclone victims in the

Delta, a task the government has restricted to the military, which it does not seem to be fulfilling judging by the remaining corpses. Though most of those arrested with him were released, Aung Kyaw San remains in custody in Insein prison. He is the editor of the weekly "Myanmar Tribune," which was temporarily shut-down a few months ago due to financial problems. Media sources told us authorities suspect he provides news to foreign news agencies and launched blogs about the true situation after the storm.

The Untold Good News

¶4. (C) The relief work of Zarganar's fellow-activist/actor Kyaw Thu and his Free Funeral Society continues unhindered. 88 Generation leader Toe Kyaw Hlaing has also continued Zarganar's relief works since the arrest, and yesterday passed to us a VCD of his organization delivering USAID donated tarps to villages in the Delta. NLD members also told us they are continuing their relief work in the Delta without problems. Local officials know who they are, but do not bother them as long as their work is relief-driven and not political.

¶5. (C) There are so many private relief efforts ongoing that it seems almost every contact we have has organized or participated in a relief mission to the Delta. U.S. Embassy employees' families (FSN and American) regularly travel to the Delta delivering relief supplies. In addition to the efforts reported in Refs A and C, an American citizen recently visited us and described the numerous trips she had taken to the Delta (without official permission) with the famous Mandalay monk, Sitagu Sayadaw. She described the massive relief effort he had organized including trucking in over 300 MT of rice from Thailand and other areas of Burma. She informed us that the GOB had used the relief network he had organized to distribute many of the donated goods from the Thai Government that we had brought in on our C-130 flights.

¶6. (C) Markus Kostner (PROTECT), a World Bank employee who participated in the Post Nargis Joint Assessment and is drafting the social impact analysis, told us that assessors found a massive outpouring of private assistance from across Burma throughout the Delta. The aid was being distributed through monasteries, local NGOs, community based organizations (CBOs), or directly to villagers. His team encountered several chartered boats by groups of concerned citizens from Rangoon or other cities distributing rice, medicines, and other vital goods. Many local NGOs were working with and through the prominent trading companies (otherwise known as the crony companies) because these companies did not always have the expertise or delivery mechanisms to reach remote villages or meet specific needs. NGOs, in turn, found they gained unfettered access by working with the influential trading companies. The Township authorities are not fools, Kostner explained, they know the government does not have the capacity to respond to Nargis appropriately so they let private donors distribute relief to the people.

A New Balance of Power

¶7. (C) Kostner continued that the vast and eclectic relief efforts were bad from a coordination perspective, but very good from an operating environment perspective. By and large, the community-based distribution mechanisms set up by these local NGOs, monks, and businesses gave the villagers control over distribution of supplies. As a result, Kostner elaborated, relationships between villagers and local authorities were changing. In villages they visited, the residents had taken actions to ensure aid was distributed transparently and evenly. People now held their leaders accountable to make sure aid was "spread equitably and used productively." Kostner deduced that these changing power

structures have the potential to transform existing systems of patronage and power. Micro-credit and recovery grants could provide villagers with a sense of independence and control they did not have before, he explained.

Getting in the Game

¶8. (C) Nay Win Maung and Tin Maung Thann of local NGO Myanmar Egress urged us to see participation in the Cyclone Nargis response effort as an opportunity to re-engage Burma with the world and bring it out of isolation. The participation of ASEAN, the World Bank, and the ADB could be used as a push-factor for the GOB, they believed. This would require creativity and patience, they warned, but was an opportunity that should not be passed up, especially for a country with the power and influence of the United States, which is so deeply respected by the Burmese for its democratic principles. Cyclone Nargis relief had the potential to create a bottom-up push for political change by breaking the patronage bond of the regime, they argued. The C-130 flights were an excellent start, they added, and an almost unbelievable concept for most Burmese. No one could have previously imagined U.S. military planes in Yangon International Airport, Nay Win Maung commented.

The C-130s

¶9. (C) There has been an overwhelmingly positive response to our C-130 flights among the Burmese public, government officials, and international organizations and INGOs. Many of those who blamed the U.S. for the 2005 pullout of the Global Fund from Burma have sought us out to comment that our leadership in the Cyclone Nargis relief effort reversed negative opinions of us among the assistance community in Burma and has been favorably commented upon by their GOB interlocutors. Government officials are now comfortable with massive amounts of U.S. relief supplies being given directly to INGOs, who distribute them to those in need, with much greater access than they ever had before.

Comment:

¶10. (C) The U.S. has an opportunity to show continued leadership as emergency relief shifts to recovery. Many INGO representatives have told us they appreciate our principled stance and the pressure we bring to bear on the UN as a major donor, to push back when the regime backtracks on access and visas. We can use this influence to craft a relief effort that encompasses democratic principles such as participatory decision making, accountability, and community-engagement, and builds the capacity of civil society by funding local NGOs and CBOs. We can sponsor workshops and provide speakers to further educate and build capacity of these organizations.

¶11. (C) While the formal political opposition remains severely constrained by the regime, civil society continues to expand. Cyclone Nargis relief offers an opportunity to strengthen it further and promote grass-roots and community organizations which empower people to find alternatives to continued military rule. From these organizations future leaders may one day emerge. However, without training and funding, this may never happen. In addition, any democratic transition will have a better chance of succeeding if a strong civil society is in place. From the current vantage point, this task seems enormous, but we have to start somewhere. The overwhelming response of ordinary Burmese to Cyclone Nargis shows this potential exists. We should take every opportunity to expand and build on it to promote sustained, democratic change in Burma. End summary.

VILLAROSA